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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 ASTANA 000376

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STATE FOR P, S/P, SCA/CEN, EUR/RUS, S/SRAP  
FROM AMBASSADOR RICHARD HOAGLAND

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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: THE CENTRAL ASIAN PIVOT

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[1](#)C. ASTANA 0319  
[1](#)D. MOSCOW 0220  
[1](#)E. TASHKENT 0160

Classified By: Ambassador Richard E. Hoagland: 1.4 (B), (D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: We have enormous equities at play in Afghanistan, Russia, and China. Kazakhstan in particular, and Central Asia more widely, has a pivotal role to play in securing our national interests. With the advent of a new Administration, we need to take hold of the opportunities in a far more effective and high-level fashion than we have before. Kazakhstan is a reliable partner that is looking for a wider leadership role. We should harness this, especially in relation to Afghanistan.

[1](#)2. (C) SUMMARY CONTINUED: To understand Kazakhstan's potential role as a strategic diplomatic partner for this effort, we will need to look accurately at reality as it exists. Though authoritarian, Kazakhstan is a proto-democracy whose on-the-ground reality is different from the simplistic caricatures of Central Asia. While a limited number of elements of the government have bought Russian anti-U.S. propaganda, by and large Kazakhstan is well-balanced and wants especially to play a role in Central Asia's modern and stable development. It is important to remember that Kazakhstan, as the OSCE's 2010 Chairman-in-Office, will play a pivotal role between Putin's Moscow and the OSCE's Western values. We need to engage Kazakhstan's top leadership now. END SUMMARY.

COOPERATION ON AFGHANISTAN

[1](#)3. (C) President Nazarbayev and some of his closest advisers and ministers have made it clear to me that they care deeply about achieving stability in Afghanistan, precisely because it is in their own national interest to do so. In 2008, Kazakhstan provided \$3 million for reconstruction and humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, and intends to continue to do so at about the same level in 2009, budget permitting. (COMMENT: By our standards, \$3 million is mere pocket change. But for a country that has never had an

institutionalized foreign assistance program, the amount is significant. END COMMENT.) The pro-American Deputy Minister of Defense Sembinov, with President Nazarbayev's blessing, just completed a successful trip to Kabul to consult with the U.S. Embassy, U.S. military leadership, and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) leadership. President Nazarbayev is willing to send Kazakhstani staff officers to the ISAF headquarters in Kabul and, possibly later, non-combat military support to Afghanistan, as it did for five-plus years in Iraq. Within seven weeks after first contact by U.S. TRANSCOM, Kazakhstan agreed to participate in the Northern Distribution Network for Afghanistan, without any great drama.

14. (C) Bottom line: Kazakhstan is on board with us vis-a-vis Afghanistan, and would welcome further suggestions from us how to move forward. We have a relatively wide open door for further engagement with Kazakhstan on Afghanistan.

A NEO-SOVIET "SILK CURTAIN"?

15. (C) Astana has a special relationship with Moscow that we recognize and do not dispute. However, it is important to understand that because Kazakhstan is relatively rich and sophisticated it is not overly beholden to Russia, despite this "special relationship."

16. (C) Russia, however, sees it differently. Since the end of 2001, Russia has consistently asserted its "sphere of influence" in Central Asia. From 2004, once Putin consolidated his "vertical of power" domestically, he turned

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his government's attention to the Near Abroad, especially to Central Asia. The United States rolled its eyes at Russia's creation of a number of Moscow-dominated regional organizations like the Cooperative Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and others as feckless, vodka-swilling talk-shops devised and led by the Kremlin. These Moscow-controlled organizations can make decisions and issue policy statements only if there is a full consensus among all members. As a result, no individual CSTO member can agree to the establishment of a foreign military presence on its territory without Moscow's consent. While the former Red Army might not threaten the independent states of Central Asia, Kremlin ideologues and their lawyers have worked mightily to erect a neo-Soviet "Silk Curtain" around Central Asia, with the goal of making the five Central Asian states Cold War-style satellites of Russia.

HOWEVER

17. (C) However, there is an important saving grace. The Central Asian states, over the last two decades, have become quite fond of their own independence and sovereignty. And each has clearly distinguished itself from the others. It's important to admit they fight among themselves, and some of the presidents detest each other (viz., Uzbekistan's Karimov and Tajikistan's Rahmon) and refuse to consider regional cooperation. Arguably, Nazarbayev has emerged as the elder statesman of the region and has good relations with all ) except, of course, Karimov. We should work to build an increasingly productive and reliable partnership with Kazakhstan, based on mutual interests and mutual respect.

18. (C) Precisely because Astana wants strong relations with both Moscow and Washington (as well as with Beijing), U.S.-Russia "competition unsettles Kazakhstan's leadership, and thus they have a powerful interest in supporting cooperation between Moscow and Washington. We need to be mindful of this fact. Indeed, the Astana leadership, in many different ways in recent weeks, has told me it is willing to play a constructive role to help bring Moscow and Washington back to a reasonable level of cooperation and collaboration. In mid-January, President Nazarbayev told U.S. CDR CENTCOM General Petraeus that the United States needs to listen

closely to Russia -- and Kazakhstan is willing to help. On February 26, Presidential Adviser Yertysbayev told me Kazakhstan "should and can" play this role. Foreign Minister Tazhin has repeatedly told me Kazakhstan is well-positioned to play this role and is ready to do so. But it needs to hear from us.

¶9. (C) Bottom line: Kazakhstan is willing to use Nazarbayev's close and easy relations with Moscow to try to increase stability in the region, including in Afghanistan. To what degree he could fundamentally influence Putin's and the siloviki's worst instincts would, of course, be open to question. At the very least, we need to work hard to widen Kazakhstan's role as a contributor to stability in Afghanistan, strengthen Kazakhstan's own ability to withstand Russian pressure, and work with Astana to advance our issues throughout Central Asia.

#### AN IMPORTANT CONSTRAINT

¶10. (S) Kazakhstan's "multi-vector" foreign policy is successful, and a number of key ministers and presidential advisers are outward looking internationalists who engage well with the United States. However, the Committee for National Security (KNB), the successor to the Soviet-era KGB, is a problem. The general consensus is that KNB Chairman Shabdarbayev leans strongly toward Russia and cooperates closely with Russia's intelligence services, sometimes to our detriment. Further, the United States is not in the KNB's good graces because we have steadfastly, and correctly, refused to be drawn into the feud-to-the-death between President Nazarbayev and his exiled-in-Austria former

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son-in-law, Rakhat Aliyev. Despite the real problems this has caused in our bilateral relationship, I have seen evidence that President Nazarbayev, when he judges that it is in Kazakhstan's national interest, tends to side with the angels -- because he cares about his relationship with the United States, as well as building an international image as a statesman.

#### ENGAGE, ENGAGE, ENGAGE

¶11. (C) I recommend that Washington engage fully with Astana 1) to support our own goals in Afghanistan, and 2) to signal clearly to the international community -- including Moscow, Beijing, Brussels, and other capitals -- that, even if we leave Manas in Kyrgyzstan, we are certainly not leaving Central Asia and certainly do not accept Russia's "privileged sphere of influence" that would make the Central Asian states satellites of the Kremlin.

¶12. (C) A strong signal of our intentions would be to invite President Nazarbayev to Washington. Even more significant would be a visit, even if brief, by President Obama to Astana. Quite frankly, that would be a political earthquake in the region. Likewise, a visit soonest by Secretary Clinton -- ideally in conjunction with stops in Moscow and Kabul -- would be a powerful sign that the United States is reordering its intentions and priorities in Central Asia for the benefit of our policy in Afghanistan.

#### BACKGROUND

¶13. (U) Since its independence, Kazakhstan has implemented three fundamental decisions that have made it worthy of closer attention.

¶14. (SBU) First, almost from the beginning, Kazakhstan has achieved serious economic and financial reforms that, before the current global economic crisis, placed it on a par with the countries of Central Europe, and led to about \$11 billion in U.S. direct foreign investment, including at least \$8 billion in the oil and gas sector, especially by Chevron, ExxonMobil, and ConocoPhillips. Other major U.S.

corporations are also present in Kazakhstan, like General Electric and Proctor & Gamble. By the middle of the next decade, Kazakhstan will become one of the world's top-10 oil exporters, and its natural gas potential is equally impressive and could help diminish the Russian Gazprom monopoly in Eurasia. Kazakhstan has also witnessed the emergence of a real economic middle class -- not just in the political capital of Astana and the financial/cultural capital of Almaty, but also in regional capitals across this vast country, the geographical size of Western Europe.

¶15. (SBU) Second, from the beginning of its independence in 1991 when it was a Soviet-heritage nuclear-weapons state, Kazakhstan renounced its nuclear status and has become a steadfastly reliable partner with the United States in the battle against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, both nuclear and biological.

¶16. (SBU) Third, since its independence, Kazakhstan has understood the need to develop its human capital. The government implemented its "Bolashak (Future) Program" that has continued, even in the most parlous economic times, to send its young people abroad for full university educations, mostly in the West. Today, more than 4,500 young Kazakhstanis have completed their higher-education degrees under this program, and many thousands more have done so with their own resources. The results are visible every day in both the private and public sectors, where sophisticated, English-speaking, bright young people are increasingly playing constructive roles. The government itself promotes these globally-oriented young people into surprisingly powerful roles. Some key ministers and advisers, especially in the economic sector, are in their mid-30s.

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¶17. (C) Though still authoritarian, Kazakhstan impresses me because civil society is relatively free to organize and operate, and regularly engages the government, sometimes influencing government decisions and draft legislation -- even if civil society doesn't always win its maximalist positions. The government has established and supports a number of civil-society organizations with a wide variety of opinion, from squawking government parrots to outspokenly shrill opposition voices, all within the same government-approved organization. Remarkably, the Prime Minister has established his own Internet blog that welcomes, across the full spectrum of political opinion, citizen comment; and he has instructed all other ministers to do likewise. Grass-roots democracy is alive, and I would judge even growing, in Kazakhstan. For a more in-depth view of political Kazakhstan, see reftel A.  
HOAGLAND